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## Early predictors of workplace mobbing

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the predictors of workplace mobbing and to map possible solutions as stated by victims. Three distinct researches were conducted, as follows:

1. Sociometric test followed by semi-structured interviews with the members of a department offered an “in progress view” of the phenomenon.
2. Theoretical analysis of organizational culture models and characteristics prone to mobbing were helpful in conceptualizing mobbing and preparing interviews.
3. Semi-structured interviews with mobbing victims from different organizations were analyzed to find out how subjects define *post-factum* the early predictors of mobbing and provide solutions for the problem.

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**Keywords:** mobbing; predictors; early intervention; sociometric test; interview.

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### 1. Problem statement

Workplace mobbing, alternatively also called bullying or psychological terror was defined for the first by Heinz Leymann and Bo-Göran Gustavsson in 1984 (Leymann, 1996). Beginning with Leymann's findings the issue started to get considerable scientific and societal attention in Europe, first in Sweden and the Nordic countries than in the rest of western Europe. The definition given by Leymann is still valid and basic today: mobbing is a hostile, “unethical communication” and behaviour of one individual or of a group directed towards one or a small number of individuals who due to the systematic – at least once a week for at least six months - negative acts becomes unable to defend himself. As a consequence the target may experience serious health and social harms (Leymann, 1996, p. 168).

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Following studies detailed the content of the mobbing concept naming a number of hostile behaviours. Regarding basic characteristics of the phenomenon there has been consensus among researchers while adding important nuances and new elements to the basic definition.

Stale Einarsen (1999) completed the concept with the perception element: the directed behaviour must be perceived by the target as hostile and humiliating.

Vartia's (2001) research proved that not the strictly defined duration and frequency but the systematic nature of negative acts is harmful.

Being a more destructive stressor than all other workplace stressors together (Einarsen, 1999) researchers report the following health harming and social consequences of mobbing: psychosomatic symptoms, PTSD, suicidal ideation, depression, low self confidence, deterioration of family relationships, permanent job loss (Lutgen-Sandvig, Namie & Namie, 2009).

In Romania mobbing is still an underreported and understudied phenomenon, seven studies have appeared so far. The results of the first systematic research of mobbing in Romania were reported in 2010 (Gheondea et al.). In the same year in Romania there was established the first anti-mobbing centre which offers psychological and legal counseling for mobbing victims.

Taking into consideration the devastating effects of mobbing it is paradoxical that at present still in many organizations the targeted individuals have to endure humiliating sufferings and finally the victim has to exit the organization while the abuse remains without any consequence for the perpetrator.

## **2. Purpose of the study**

Good practice examples enforce that policies and special legislations are needed to address the problem of workplace bullying. The earlier the intervention the lower the costs are. Literature differentiates "measures of prevention, protection and treatment." (Di Martino, Hoel & Cooper, 2003). Early interventions based on predictors may save workers from many sufferings.

According to Merriam – Webster dictionary to predict, the word from which predictor derives, means: to declare or indicate in advance; especially: foretell on the basis of observation, experience, or scientific reason.

Accepting the above mentioned definition in the first research the predictors are stated by the researcher investigating an in progress organizational processes based on his special knowledge.

In the second research the predictors are stated based on the experience of mobbing victims who post factum in the semi structured interviews define the predictors of mobbing from a retrospective view.

## **3. Research method**

The research design with its three distinct studies proposed to explore the predictors of mobbing in different organizational settings.

### **3.1. The first research**

In 2008 when my first research was conducted the term of workplace mobbing or any of its synonyms was hardly heard in Romania. Based on Leymann's findings that public administration is over represented in mobbing (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996) the research at that time had the purpose to detect if mobbing can be determined in public administration institution chosen at random. This research investigated the organizational reality in process.

In an eight member public administration department a sociometric test was applied and the results were represented in a target sociogram.

As a next step semi structured interviews were conducted with questions referring to work organization, tasks, relationships, influential individuals, problem solving patterns, climate, leadership, experiences, positions in the group. This research investigates organizational reality in process.

#### Results:

The target sociogram showed that the centre of the community was formed of 4 persons (2 central positions and 2 almost central) closely interrelated, this small group reached directly the others, except for one, the most marginal position person, who was connected to the group through only one relationship with a not centre-member. Marginal position may mean abusive treatment of the excluded individual.

The semi structured interviews validated the positions shown by the sociogram. Although interviews did not confirm mobbing, they revealed the risk, a situation prone to mobbing. The following predictors can be stated:

- Central members rely on thinking in terms of old new member. The dichotomy of old new member is strongly stated.
- The dichotomical view of the group is spread to all members.
- The otherwise not negative traits of the marginal position member are evaluated negatively by central members.
- It is expressed by central members that the marginal member is different, not only new.
- It is stated that the marginal position member deserves that position.
- Central members have the necessary relationships to spread their ideas and shape organizational reality and the organizational identity of members.

It is important to mention that the situation was not perceived as hostile by the marginal member.

This research can be further developed with an interview with the marginal group member to see what happened in that community in three years time.

### 3.2. The second study

Analyzing organizational culture theories proved to be helpful in framing mobbing.

Scheins iceberg metaphor with its visible and invisible part (Schein, 2004) suggests the difficulty of accessing “complex organizational phenomena” (Bakó & Szigety, 2011, p. 236). The model proved the necessity of a complex research design.

When conceptualizing mobbing retrospective sensemaking can add valuable details in order to understand and frame the organizational process of mobbing. By retrospective sensemaking Weick means the post factum character of understanding organizational acts and processes (Bako & Szigety 2011). The semi-structured interviews in the third research with mobbing victims who went through a mobbing experience in the past provide the post factum view of the mobbing process.

### 3.3. The third study

There were conducted 12 semi structured interviews with mobbing victims from different and various organizational settings, who after some time reflect on their mobbing experience, trying to define predictors and name solutions for this problem.

## 4. Findings

The respondents regarding predictors of mobbing reported the following antecedents perceived as predictors related to organizational culture and interaction: a previous conflict(5) but also rejection without any reason or conflict (2); dichotomy in thinking about the group (new-old members, university

degree-no degree, friends-not friends, graduates of x university and graduates of y university, 2 ethnic groups, natives and members from other locality, different and contradicting values) (8); work related discrimination and injustice(4); anarchy(5); cohesion, togetherness of the group is reached by concentrating on negative things, cohesive force of hate (5); taking responsibilities, no clear or not giving or not respecting job description or responsibilities (3); not providing necessary information for more than once or twice (2); too much spare time (2); previous cases of bullying or multiple bullying or chains of bullying - targets become perpetrators or even all these forms together (8); laissez faire leader (2); authoritarian leader(2); management composed of authoritarian and laissez faire members (1); anarchy(1); public institution(2); organization characterized by high competitiveness and success orientation (2).

Regarding the personality of the perpetrator interview subjects mentioned the following predictors: deceiving, manipulative character (5); kind seductive (3), oppressive, annihilating(4) stealing other people's words, attitudes, ideas (1), plagiarism(1), lust for power and success (6) Communication style of the perpetrator is characterized by monologues (1), by provoking misunderstandings(3), verbally impolite or rude (3).

The target in most cases presents vulnerability: sensible (3), naive (4), independent (4), less assertive (4).

Subjects reported that while during the experience was hard to think of a solution, post factum they have a clearer view of it.

Reported personal solutions: friendly but distant attitude towards colleagues (3); delimitation of private and professional life (5); facing and becoming conscious of own fears (1) fighting back the first tries, not letting the perpetrator to threaten the target and/or being more assertive(7); being not receptive to negative acts(5); pretending loyalty or becoming loyal to the perpetrator (1) claiming the job description (2), knowing rules, regulations (1), not identifying yourself entirely/just with work and workplace, finding or having other sources of energy.(3), apologize from the perpetrator (1); solidarity of the colleagues (3) colleagues' open expression of rejecting injustice and supporting the targeted person (3); moving to other department(2), leaving the organization(8)

Organizational solutions: help from management (3) screening when recruiting leaders (1), trainings for management and staff (2), an element in the organization dealing with such problems (3)

Societal level: foundations (1), information (4), prevention (4), youth education (3), even including mobbing as a course theme in the school curriculum(1), policies, law (4)

## 5. Conclusion

Followed by semistructured interview, the sociometric test proved to be functional for early diagnosis. Early intervention based on diagnosis may save the potential victims from many sufferings. Interviews reveal details about the predictors and possible solutions, as they are conceptualized by victims. "In progress" and retrospective view provide a complex picture of predictors and solutions.

Most respondents preferred personal solutions, since they considered them the most realistic. Some of the victims mentioned organizational solutions or policies and legislation as desirable but perceived them improbable because of the subjective nature of the phenomenon or because solving such problems at organizational or societal level is not part of the culture.

In the specific context of a hardly known phenomenon member check is planned to enhance validity. After having reached an increased level of awareness of mobbing phenomenon quantitative research design for naming predictors and solutions might be also an appropriate choice.

Findings can be helpful for management in building a proactive response to mobbing. Policy makers also could rely on findings in raising awareness and building multi leveled policies of prevention, protection and treatment. The three level policy could be completed by the early intervention segment.

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